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Developing a UK widening participation forum

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Widening Participation (WP) addresses 'discrepancies in the take-up of higher education opportunities between different under-represented groups'.¹ The United Kingdom (UK) government set a target to double WP university students by 2020, and universities invested heavily to address this.²

Medicine remains an 'elite' profession with the highest over-representation of people from privileged backgrounds and the highest incidence of social reproduction.³ The role of our classed society, the social exclusivity of British private education and the nature of medical selection strategies perpetuate the under-representation of students from under-privileged backgrounds. Feeling an outsider in medical school is something EH vividly remembers and has instilled a passion to ease transition for others.

The Selecting for Excellence Final Report⁴ confirmed this under-representation and established the Medical Schools Council Selection Alliance (MSCSA). It recommended the collection of accurate socio-economic profiles, widespread dissemination of application information, targeted outreach and improved accessibility to work experience and access programmes. MSCSA work increased the number of under-privileged students by 35%.⁵ However, their remit is restricted to student selection and admission.

This is where the National Medical Schools WP Forum (National Forum) comes in. We formed in 2015, after EH presented a WP workshop to a Northern England medical admissions meeting. As the workshop ended, EH invited those interested in collaborative WP work to meet him at the break. Anticipating a low uptake, he was pleasantly surprised when six people approached. Discussions initiated the creation of a small group of medical educators and the MSCSA. EH and AS became chair and deputy chair, and LA chairs the national access subgroup. All the three authors shared a strong

passion for WP, and the forum enabled us to disseminate our ambitions for WP to a national audience.

The organisation expanded rapidly and became the National Forum. With 24 medical schools, the MSCSA, voluntary organisations and postgraduate medical colleges, we represent a diverse collective to identify current and emerging issues and establish practical solutions (Box 1. The National Forum's Objectives).

To ensure the student voice is central to our mission, we appointed a student representative in 2018. A student subcommittee formed, providing a forum for WP medical student societies and advocacy for lived experiences of WP initiatives. They organised and delivered three MSCSA-funded national conferences for 300+ medical students, each providing a national platform for improving student access and success. This group enables us to understand key issues affecting students, and disseminate our work to the student body. Students also experience national leadership and opportunities to engage with key stakeholders at this early stage in their career. On reflection, we realised that the forum lacked junior doctor representation. We, therefore, formed a subcommittee, extending our work to WP junior doctor experiences.

The forum reacted early to the impact of the pandemic on WP pupils, with school closures causing inequality of academic progression. Loss of learning due to lack of equipment, internet access and peaceful study spaces could 'reverse the years of progress' in WP.⁶ We formed a 'loss of learning' subcommittee, to address the risk of losing an entire demographic of future doctors.

We convened a teaching and learning subcommittee, to improve the experience and success of WP students at medical school. Bassett *et al*⁷ identified financial hardship, juggling paid work and study, and difficulty developing social networks as the main issues

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BOX 1 National Forum Purpose and Objectives**National Medical Schools' Widening Participation (WP) Forum****Purpose and Objectives**

The purpose of the forum is to increase the proportion of students from WP backgrounds who gain entry to a member medical school and successfully complete the course. In order to fulfil its purpose the members of the forum will work together and with other agencies to:

- To develop a collective strategy
- To share good practice on outreach and evaluation
- To share anonymised WP data (according to appropriate data sharing guidelines)
- To regularly update on activities
- To develop new beneficial practices
- To participate in research
- To liaise with the Medical Schools Council (MSC) and other organisations and work collaboratively together.
- To develop public engagement strategies
- To develop strategies to support medical students from WP backgrounds
- To raise the voice of medical students involved in WP work

for WP students. This subcommittee is addressing these barriers to improve experience and progression at medical school.

Our work has improved student chances but we feel our greatest impact evolved from collaboration and knowledge sharing. Medical schools offer guaranteed interview and grade reduction for WP students engaged with individual medical school outreach programmes. AS convinced a consortium of six member medical schools to permit access programme pupils to receive concessions from all six institutions. The different selection criteria and processes of each medical school presented us with significant challenges. Through determined negotiation, we developed a national unified approach (UKWPMED), which has significantly increased possibilities for WP applicants to study medicine.

Reflecting on the past 5 years, the National Forum has evolved into a vibrant, collaborative organisation. Our strengths include shared vision, and focus on the complete student journey. We understand the importance of WP work by medical schools, junior doctors and voluntary organisations. We empower the student voice and use our standing to work closely with key regulatory and assessment bodies, (Box 2. Quotes from Forum members).

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Our main challenge is the lack of funding and reliance on individual institutions to cover all costs. However, we are proud of all the opportunities this group has enabled. From humble beginnings, we are now a powerful and influential national advocate for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, cooperating with key stakeholders to level the playing field. We hope our work inspires and informs clinical educators across the globe to form similar collectives to tackle under-representation in medicine. (Box 2).

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BOX 2 Quotes from National Forum Members

Quotes from National Forum Members, on how it has progressed their work in WP:

The National Medical Schools Widening Participation Forum has proved to be the key place for practitioners to meet and share ideas and their work. Over the last five years it has attracted staff and students from most of the UK medical schools and this has helped form a critical mass to develop and extend a variety of widening access initiatives.

Dr Paul Garrud, Chair MSCSA.

UKWPMed is an innovative collaboration between six medical schools who have all agreed to allow students doing any one of their Widening Participation (Preparation for Medicine) courses to receive the benefits of an automatic interview and a contextual offer. In the first year of operation, many students have participated, giving each of them a much greater chance of obtaining a place. This collaboration has attracted national interest and many others are interested in adopting this approach. The idea for UKWPMed arose out of collaboration within the National Forum. The Forum also made it possible to attract the necessary level of interest to launch the scheme.

Dr Andy Spencer, Deputy Chair, National Forum. Deputy Admissions Lead, Keele Medical School.

The National Medical Schools Widening Participation Forum is a passionate group of like-minded people committed to creating a more diverse and representative medical profession. The opportunities for networking and collaboration forged by the forum have given me the opportunity to meet and work with an amazing team of people from across the country, which has affected widening participation in all of our institutions.

Dr Clare Ray, Committee Member, National Forum. Reader, University of Birmingham.

Being part of the National Forum helped me forge collaborations with colleagues to carry out multicentre research on barriers to access, transition and progression of WP students in medicine. An important follow-up is that the students from our WAMS have set up the peer support/peer tutoring groups in response to the findings of our study and want to help their peers from WP backgrounds (this includes small group tutorials and mastering the MCQs).

Dr Nana Sartania, Research Lead, National Forum. Deputy Admissions Lead, University of Glasgow Medical School.

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